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CADRE Quick-Look

Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue



Foreign Language Posture in the US Air Force

John L. Conway III

Problem. The Air Force has no central language program or an overarching language plan. These issues are not new nor have they been ignored. In the past two decades numerous articles, studies, and Process Action Teams have reported the same problems and all have recommended numerous solutions, to no avail.

Why are these problems, so thoroughly articulated, not resolved?

One explanation is that the Air Force has successfully met each immediate language challenge, but just barely. Over the years, “just in time” language training, contract linguists, and most recently, two-year mobilization of reservists all helped meet active force shortfalls with varying degrees of success.

In short, the Air Force has muddled through its language crises.

This begs a corollary to the old axiom: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

That is, “If it ain’t *hard-broke*, why worry about a permanent fix?”

Background. Cold War language requirements remained the driver for forecasting manpower and training long after the Wall was reduced to a million souvenir paperweights.

Pop-up contingencies requiring “exotic” or “low flow” languages (Haitian Creole, Pashto, and Somali are three that come to mind) confounded the deliberate foreign language planning process and such languages were deemed too difficult to maintain as a career field in lieu of more traditional language fare, such as German and French. Additionally the traditional mindset that language was the purview of the intelligence community shunted most language requirements into that career path, while overlooking the needs of other disciplines.

As a result, few “exotics” or “low flows” were available to meet contingencies and, worse, career fields had little access to translators, or language and culturally savvy personnel upon deployment.

A major problem is that the database of Air Force linguists is not comprehensive, nor is it mandatory to provide this data. Members are “encouraged” to “self-assess” and take the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) on their own initiative, but many do not volunteer to do so for a variety of reasons.

Moreover, there is a wide gulf between officer and enlisted management approaches to language skills and utilization. According to a recent AFMPC briefing, “Linguist is an enlisted AFSC.” Officers with language skills must pursue other

fields early in their careers, with the opportunity use those skills postponed to some later date. They are counseled to “save” language for follow-on assignments in HUMINT, the Foreign Area Officer program, or for Attaché duties.

The cost of contract linguist support to DOD since 9-11 is estimated at \$2 Billion and at least another \$1 Billion earmarked in the next year. Accessing, training and retaining a uniformed force throughout a career could reduce this bill significantly.

Some Solutions. It’s time to publish and promulgate clear guidance and a single vision for the Air Force language program from the Secretary of the Air Force. To do this, the Air Force must be a full partner in current DOD language transition initiative to make sure all Air Force language needs are fully articulated.

Further:

- Have the Secretary anoint a champion at the SAF level who is tasked to institutionalize the language program throughout the service while allowing the various disciplines maintain some control over their own unique needs.

- Conduct a comprehensive language survey of who needs what.

- This should be done on several levels: by discipline (Security Forces, Medical, Security Forces, etc), by MAJCOM (ACC, AFSOC, etc.), and by theater to assure its thoroughness.

- Codify these requirements in OPLANs and UTCs, and for AEF.

- Establish annual reviews of these requirements.

- Determine all of the funding resources available for Air Force language programs—to include proficiency maintenance programs—and ensure that annual SAF budget rollups reflect true Air Force needs.

- Find out who knows what: Conduct a *mandatory* vice voluntary language survey of all of the Air Force and create a computer database that lists languages, perceived fluency, tested fluency, and method by which obtained. A current structure exists, but is voluntary and outdated. To survey only accessions to the Air Force is to wait for a complete knowledge base of all Air Force personnel with language skills until roughly 2034.

- Require the Defense Language Aptitude Battery (DLAB) be given to all BMT, OTS, Academy, and AFROTC cadets to capture all of the Air Force’s potential language skills and aptitudes.

- Educate senior leadership about the need for language support in coalition warfare, both from Allied as well as an adversary perspective.

- To that end, inject language problems into Air Force Wargaming scenarios to highlight the issues.

- Get serious about using emerging technology to augment translation of open source documents and assist in field operations. Technology is a force multiplier in other arenas, why not language?

- Work toward reducing contractor translation costs by focusing efforts on retention of the existing language cadre within the Air Force and recruiting and identifying native speakers.

- While bonuses may motivate some, language assignments and reward/recognition of language skills may go further to motivate retention.

- Look at how our sister services—particularly the Army—approach their language issues and adopt their best practices.